

LETTERS

SCREENING FOR HPV

More education is needed before we burden women with their HPV status

Emma Damon Butterfield *foundation year 2 doctor*

Heart of England Foundation Trust, Birmingham B9 5SS, UK

Elfström and colleagues do not discuss the ethics of human papillomavirus (HPV) testing, which will become a more contentious problem as more women are screened for HPV.¹

We encourage patients diagnosed with sexually transmitted infections to tell their sexual partners. It is mandatory for patients to inform their partners of potentially life threatening infections like HIV: if the patient refuses to do so, the doctor may break confidentiality to inform the at-risk partner.² Knowingly exposing someone to HIV infection is a crime in the UK.³

HPV infection is common—most sexually active adults will be infected with at least one strain at some point: 39% of 20-24 year old women in the UK have potentially oncogenic HPV types 16 or 18.⁴

Except for strains that cause genital warts, most HPV infections are initially asymptomatic: currently most HPV infected women are blissfully ignorant of their status. If widespread HPV testing is rolled out, how will we advise women to talk to their sexual partners about their HPV status? Sexually transmitted infections are still a difficult topic to discuss: especially if the infection is untreatable.

Will we ask women to tell partners that they are infected with an untreatable infection? Or say that they need to tell their

partners only about oncogenic strains and strains that cause warts? There might be legal ramifications for a woman who knowingly transmits HPV to a male partner, who subsequently infects another female, who develops cervical cancer.

We need to arm patients with the facts, so that they can have a meaningful conversation about HPV with their partners. If we are going to tell women their HPV status, we should support their ability to cope with that information.

Competing interests: None declared.

Full response at: www.bmj.com/content/348/bmj.g130/rr/684409.

- 1 Elfström KM, Smelov V, Johansson ALV, Eklund C, Naucélér P, Arnheim-Dahlström L, et al. Long term duration of protective effect for HPV negative women: follow-up of primary HPV screening randomised controlled trial. *BMJ* 2014;348:g130. (16 January.)
- 2 General Medical Council. Statement about HIV infection and AIDS. 1993. www.gmc-uk.org/Archived/GMC_Statement_HIV_infection_and_AIDS_the_Ethical_Considerations_June_1993.PDF_50325113.PDF.
- 3 Woman jailed for giving lover HIV. *BBC News* 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/5094708.stm>.
- 4 NHS. The human papillomavirus vaccine. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/207669/dh_133346.pdf.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2014;348:g1443

© BMJ Publishing Group Ltd 2014